

## Relationship management: capitalising on the informal

Article (Accepted Version)

Tatham, Suzanne (2019) Relationship management: capitalising on the informal. ALISS Quarterly, 14 (3). pp. 13-16. ISSN 1747-9258

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/83787/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

### **Copyright and reuse:**

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

## Relationship management: capitalising on the informal

Most Library Academic Liaison teams will have formal channels of communication which are used to 'get work done', but often we make the most progress when we forge relationships in less formal settings. Key elements of these relationships are the trust and respect that is developed and being seen as partners. This discussion draws on examples of successful relationships that we have built at the University of Sussex. I will discuss how we have worked in partnership with academics in the Sussex Humanities Lab to deliver events such as Library Carpentry. I will share insights from our ongoing relationship with SAGE Publications which has enabled us to expand our understanding of our students and researchers. I will share how we have worked with a number of teams across the University to deliver a Digital Skills service based on JISC's Digital Capability Framework. I will also reflect on how the Library as a whole benefits from these relationships.

### **What are your formal channels of communication?**

At a recent Relationship Management conference workshop, participants were asked to list their formal channels for communicating with their academic communities. There were 60 responses to this question with attendance at departmental meetings, boards of study, library committees, university teaching and learning committees, correspondence with academics via email and liaison with Library representatives being the main responses.

The list illustrated that as librarians we have many channels for building relationships. Whilst we are all likely to have had successes using these formal channels, my focus here is on the less formal opportunities. This is not because I think they are more important but rather because they can be harder to quantify, report on and share with colleagues. However, they can be particularly effective and can produce powerful impact stories.

### **Which informal communication channels have you found successful?**

The workshop participants were asked to list any informal communication channels that they had found successful. The 57 responses were wide-ranging with coffee, corridor conversations and social media featuring prominently. Other responses included attending departmental research seminars, using the library as a performance and a display space, having dogs in the library and hosting other events such as book launches. Involvement in university-wide networks and wellbeing events were also mentioned.

A key element for me in this is finding opportunities to work in partnership. This may involve putting yourself in the other person's space, whether physical or virtual. It could be a matter of identifying similarities in your respective agendas. It can be as straightforward as just building friendships.

### **Building partnerships**

A recent opportunity for us has been our work with the Sussex Humanities Lab, a cross-disciplinary research collaboration focused on digital humanities. Some of their work touches on areas where we provide support and training such as research data management and text/data mining. We have taken this as an opportunity to collaborate, one example being a Library Carpentry workshop co-delivered by one of the Lab's academics and a librarian. We invited librarians (public, college, school and health) from across Sussex, therefore providing the academic with a wider audience for his Library Carpentry initiative.

Partnership should be mutually beneficial. We need to think about what we can offer and look for ways to align agendas.

### **Follow-up**

Sometimes, we put so much effort into organising an event that once it has happened, we move on to our next task. To maximise these opportunities, we need to think about what can be done after the event. Are there any follow-up activities or communications that we can employ to cement the relationship? As well as tweeting and retweeting the academic's posts, one of our librarians wrote a post on the Library Carpentry blog about being an official 'helper' - another example of putting yourself in the partner's space.

### **External opportunities**

Building relationships outside your institution can also be hugely beneficial for libraries. We have had some rich collaboration with external organisations which have developed from informal conversations about shared interests. Our longstanding relationship with SAGE Publications is one such example, enabling us to work with our academic community in new and exciting ways. This includes working with three undergraduate students and three doctoral researchers on our scholarship programmes. They blog regularly, carry out research amongst their peers, organise events and take part in external events such as discussion panels and conferences.

The relationship is mutually beneficial. SAGE gets direct access to students and researchers, enabling them to find out about study and research behaviour. The students have also been involved with some of SAGE's promotional activities and have road-tested some products and written reviews.

The relationship also enables us to run a Research Hive Seminar programme each year. One of last year's seminars explored working with a publisher to create a popular textbook. Professor Andy Field discussed the inspiration behind his latest publication, *An Adventure in Statistics*, and why he has been interested in doing things differently; embedding academic content into a science-fiction love story with graphic novel elements. Mark Kavanagh, Executive Publisher at SAGE, shared insight into how SAGE supported the development of the book and worked with students to create innovative marketing strategies.

### **Cross-disciplinary approach**

As a library, we are well placed to offer a cross-disciplinary approach, enabling students and academics to share their expertise and experiences beyond their own departments.

A recent example of this is a book sprint where we supported our Research Hive Scholars to produce a cross-disciplinary book, written and published in a week. Using the theme of 'home' they recruited researchers from a wide range of disciplines. They locked themselves in a room and wrote, edited and published a book in a week. Library staff supported the endeavour with technical, proof-reading and publishing assistance, including assigning chapter DOIs and upload to the institutional repository.

We are also ideally placed to offer the perfect physical space for cross-disciplinary collaboration. In our recent Digital Discovery Week, we ran a makerspace workshop which provided an opportunity for staff and students who may not be situated within a 'techy' discipline to explore some robotics. The Week also provided an opportunity for one of our physicists to showcase his infrared thermal imaging in the Library and for one of our engineers to give a seminar on 5G. We have sometimes

struggled to engage with our scientists so this felt like a quite an achievement, especially when the Head of Engineering came up to me afterwards and told me how much he loved the Library.

### Digital upskilling

A further aspect of capitalising on informal relationships is about working collaboratively with other sections within the institution. These are often the people we think of as our 'library friends'; the go-to people who you know you can rely on. For us, this is our Technology Enhanced Learning and our Study Skills teams. Recently, we have embarked on a collaborative project to roll out a digital skills service using the JISC Digital Capabilities framework. We are using it as an opportunity to upskill all of our teams in a wide range of digital skills, with the intention of offering a more unified service to staff and students.

### Shared vision

I ended my workshop by giving participants two scenarios to explore the area of communication within the library. The intention was not to suggest a correct response but rather to encourage questioning of motivations and adoption of a reflective approach.

Scenario 1.

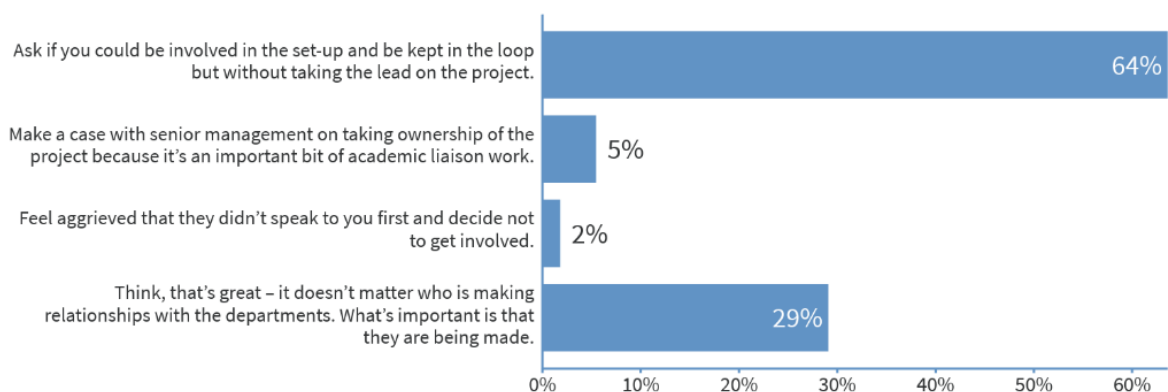
**A member of Library staff from one of the other teams has come up with a good idea for a UX project and they have already had some conversations with the relevant academic. It's with a department where your Academic Liaison team has been struggling to make inroads. Do you:**



When poll is active, respond at [PollEv.com/sussexlibrar063](https://poll-ev.com/sussexlibrar063)



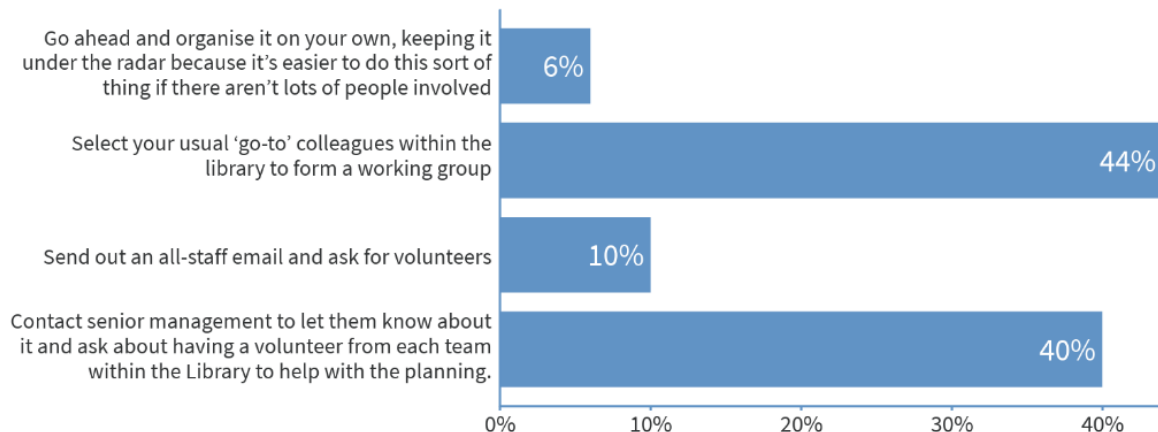
Text **SUSSEXLIBRAR063** to **020 3322 5822** once to join



## Scenario 2.

**An academic you've been talking to would like to work with you to run an exciting event in the Library but they've left it very late to ask and a tight turnaround is required. Do you:**

🗳️ When poll is active, respond at **PollEv.com/sussexlibrar063**  
📱 Text **SUSSEXLIBRAR063** to **020 3322 5822** once to join



As the part of the library service that is most often out and about, liaising with academic and professional services colleagues, we need to think about how we share the conversations that we have. What internal channels of communication do we have in place for this? How do we make sure that we avoid silos within the library and that we learn from our colleagues in other teams? How do we capture the intelligence that comes from our library assistants who spend several hours each week staffing our enquiry desks? We can deliver a better library service if we are focused on the same objectives and if we have a shared vision for how we accomplish that.